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Reading Byomkesh in Translation: *Pather Kanta* to “The Gramophone Pin Mystery”

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Abstract:

Translation of any Indian detective fiction into English started primarily with the detective character growing in popularity through adaptations in various media. Saradindu Bandyopadhyay’s Byomkesh Bakshi stories similarly started to be translated by Srijata Guha for Penguin Publishing House after the character gained popularity throughout the country on being adapted as a TV show in the late 1990s. On being translated from Bengali to English, the stories, though, remained constant in matters of plot and form, but were influenced by the shift in spatiality and temporality. This article aims to study the loss of literary elements in the process of the translation of Bandyopadhyay’s “পথের কাঁটা” (*Pather Kanta*), as “The Gramophone Pin Mystery”, in the context of translation studies.

Keywords: Translation studies, Indian English Fiction, Bengali, literary elements.

Introduction

With the advent of European powers in the sub-continent and the eventual extensive intermingling of English and Indian cultures, the language spectrum of the sub-continent has changed widely. As Amit Sen rightly says in his “Notes on Bengal Renaissance” (1944), the Bengal Renaissance impacted the entirety of the subcontinent in numerous ways. With Raja Rammohan Roy’s letter to Lord Amherst, the perspective of the Indian intellect was becoming

clearer. They wished to be educated in “useful sciences”, which could at that time be possible only with an English education. Through its various phases, English Education ultimately made English a language no longer foreign to the land. Indians, as becomes evident through the works of Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, and others, created a distinct form of English. Thus, translating texts from Indian languages like Bangla, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, etc, into English, particularly catering to the pan Indian readers or Indian diaspora, is considered as translation of a source Indian language to a target Indian language itself. Interestingly, in multilingual countries like India, translation remains an integral part, unlike the monolingual European countries, while there have been further debates on whether multilingualism has promoted or discouraged translation in India. Ganesh Devy says, “It is, of course, natural for the monolingual European cultures to be acutely conscious of the act of translation”. Since “translation is the need of the monolingual speaker,” Harish Trivedi (2006, 103–104) has argued that “multilingualism is not in general conducive to translation.” Trivedi's focus is on the claim that, despite India having “the strongest and the widest linguistic diversity in the whole world”—or, more specifically, because of it—translation is “a non-history” in India. Indeed, recorded translation among native languages has been a challenge in India throughout the ages.

In the case of detective fiction, it was primarily produced in local languages. Although detective fiction was formerly produced in Bangla, Hindi and Tamil, some Indians wrote detective fiction in English, such as Sarath Kumar Ghosh, H.K. Roy, etc. Other than some obscure Indian detective fictions in English like “The Verdict of the God” (1905), “Missing Memsahib” (1911), etc, the history of Indian English detective fiction is scarce.

As English Education in India reached its fourth stage with the advent of independence, the number of English language readers increased to a much higher number, which resulted in the

production of popular literature in English. With this growing English readership, translating other popular literature texts into English became increasingly significant.

To construct any detective fiction, the element of suspense remains elementary. Translating detective fiction requires transferring this element of suspense from source text to target text. The understanding of the formation of suspense in the source text to translate it into the target text requires the translators understanding the underlying cultural and linguistic perspectives of the source text. In the model produced by Yumiko Iwata in 2008 six conditions are listed which generate suspense. These are bifurcation, resolution, episode of interest, characters and characterisations, point of view and sustenance. Maintenance of these conditions between the source text and the target text recreates the suspense of the source text in the target text. Further approaches like Van Leuven-Zwart's Transeme Model (1989) and Scheme Theory can also be used to study the translation of detective fiction. British psychologist Bartlett (1932: 201) introduced the concept of schema to psychology research, characterising it as "an active organisation of past reactions, or experience." Schema, according to Rumelhart (1980: 34), is "a data structure for describing the memory-stored genetic ideas. "A knowledge structure that is abstract is called a schema", Pearson and Anderson (1984: 42). Following schema theory, the information being discussed is the background knowledge or prior knowledge that the readers have already gained and that helps them comprehend the text correctly.

Literature Review

Sujit Mukherjee's seminal works, "Translation as Discovery" (1981) and "Translation as Recovery" (1994), are considered foundational texts in Indian translation studies. He conceptualises translation not merely as linguistic transfer but as a process of cultural interpretation and creative reconstitution. Bijay Kumar Das's "A Handbook of Translation Studies" (2005) builds on this foundation by providing a comprehensive overview of both

Western and Indian theoretical approaches. Das outlines practical strategies while also interrogating the ideological underpinnings of translation across languages and regions in India. Rita Kothari’s “Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English” (2006) marks a significant intervention in the study of translation and postcolonial identity. Her work problematises the dominance of English in postcolonial India and examines how translation mediates access to knowledge and cultural capital. Recent scholarship, such as the special issue of *Cadernos de Tradução* (2023) titled “Translation in India: Theories, Policies, and Practices”, explores how translation mediates between India’s many linguistic traditions. These studies highlight the complex interplay of regional languages, nationalism, and globalisation in shaping translation practices. Contemporary discussions focus increasingly on ethical and methodological concerns in translating Dalit literature, oral narratives, and tribal texts. The question of fidelity is being redefined to accommodate the multiplicity of voices and epistemologies in India. His attention to modulation, compensation, and domestication demonstrates the translator's careful balancing act in maintaining the social register and stylistic flair of hard-boiled detective fiction while making it comprehensible in a different language.

In the case of academic study of translations of detective fiction, a study published in *Cadernos de Tradução* examines how Portuguese translations of Christie's novels have evolved over nearly a century in Brazil, mediating changing cultural expectations and linguistic shifts. These translations are seen not only as narrative vehicles but as agents of cultural adaptation and canon formation. Detective fiction often involves forensic, legal, or criminal jargon that poses challenges for translators. Mashkhura Shokhidova’s study emphasises that translators must have juridical, cultural, and literary competence to convey these elements accurately. In the anthology “The Voice of Suspense and Their Translation in Thrillers” (2014), edited by Susanne M. Cadera and Anita Pavić Pintarić, various critics comment through lenses like

postcolonialism, theories of suspense, adaptability, etc, on the translations of numerous European detective fictions in different European languages.

In the Indian context, the challenge becomes even more pronounced. For example, translating Bengali detective stories such as Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay's Byomkesh Bakshi involves reconciling the genre's colonial inheritance with the regional idioms and cultural realities of early 20th-century Bengal. The English translation by Sreejata Guha navigates this terrain by blending formal clarity with occasional retention of Bengali terms like "satyanweshi", thereby asserting the text's cultural distinctiveness while maintaining genre readability. Yet, not much academic significance has been achieved by this translation in terms of its study through the lenses of translation studies.

Discussion

Saradindu Bandyopadhyay started publishing the Byomkesh stories with "*Satyanweshi*" in 1934 in Bangla. This presented a detective Indian in spirit and identity. He is a middle-class Indian detective, wearing a dhoti. He loathes to use the term "detective", rather chooses to call himself "Satyanweshi", adding a philosophical perspective of truth and purpose, critiquing Doyle's Holmes, who detected for the fun of it. Unlike his predecessors, he does not quote any English author but Bengali authors; he interprets justice as the truth demands it to be, moving away from the colonial perspective of justice and having emotional ties. One of the Byomkesh stories, "*Chiriyakhana*", was made into a crime thriller by Satyajit Ray in 1963. The stories of Byomkesh came to be serialised between 1993 and 1997 by Basu Chatterjee. This created Byomkesh into a national sensation, and readers across the states became interested in reading the fiction starring this detective. Penguin launched the first translated early fictions of Byomkesh into English. These translations were carried out by Sreejata Guha. This translation was published in 1999 with an aim to cater to the growing readership of

Bandyopadhyay’s stories throughout the readers across the country as well as members of the Indian diaspora.

In her translator’s note in the first translated version of Bandyopadhyay’s short stories, Guha highlights the idea of travel, which is evident in any translation. The stories, which were primarily written for a colonial and later post-colonial Bengali readers, carried the culture coded through the language and motifs. Translating such a work into English, particularly for the Indian readers of other states, would not be carried out through a “word-for-word” translation. The implication of “sense to sense” translation would, though, carry the messages encoded in the source text for the readers of the target text, still, a considerable lot of meaning is lost in the translation.

The loss in translation can be categorized into different groups based on the type of loss, its causes, and its impacts on the source text. These differences can also be analysed using Van Leuven-Zwart’s Transeme Model (1989). This model is intended for “the description of integral translations of fictional texts.” It investigates through two sub-models, namely the comparative model and the descriptive model. The first sub-model examines how and to what extent the descriptions in the translation differ from those in the original text, while the second sub-model, based on these descriptions, seeks to formulate the reasons behind the translator’s interpretation of the source text and the strategies employed during the translation process.

The short story “*Pather Kanta*” by Bandyopadhyay came to be published somewhere around the mid-1930s. This appeared translated in the collection called “Picture Imperfect” (2000). The title *Pather Kanta* is a phrase with meanings embedded in various layers. *Pather Kanta*, which means a thorn in the path, carries many subjective meanings. When this story was translated, it was named “The Gramophone Pin Mystery”. This title hints directly to the main issue of concern in the plot and does not really satiate the level of subjective meaning that the

original title could convey. The very difference in the title asserts the loss in translation, which also dilutes this piece of writing in various ways.

Lack of equivalent terms in the target language creates a gap in the interpretation of the meaning. The term “গোবাক্খো” (gobakhkho) means as small as the eyes of a cow. Over the period of time, the term has evolved to mean a ventilation, a path for wind or a window. In the given context, it refers to a window in the drawing of the flat that the detective occupied, which is quite small yet can provide a view of the bustling city beneath. Such a reference implies the financial position of the detective, who is a mere middle-class Bengali Bhodrolok. Due to the lack of any equivalent, this term has been skipped instead; the word window has merely been used in its place, which remains unable to fit appropriately into the social connotation. The term “যুক্তি” (jukti), which can loosely refer to reason, purpose or logic in English, can neither be translated nor can the precise idea be recreated. The term has undergone various deviations owing to the Bengal Renaissance, and debates around reasons and logic have acquired a quite strong connotation about belief and misbelief. Thus, the translated phrase “way of thinking” can neither hold the substantial meaning nor do justice to the cultural code. The word “লোভ” (lōbh) refers to greed, desire, or a strong craving for something, especially material possessions. Similarly, it cannot be equated to “temptation”, which means a feeling that you want to do something, even if you know that it is wrong.

As the move from translation as text to translation as culture and politics is coined as “Cultural turn” by Hornby, the movement of ideas from one culture to another creates a considerable gap between the source text and the target text. The readership population of Bengal shared a common past, which got more unified through the colonial influence. Particular phrases that formed part of the Bangla lingo could not be recreated in another culture. Russell cites the case of cheese. A community that is not aware of what cheese is cannot have any equivalent for the

same in their language, and thus, translating such terms, Jacobson argues, can only be carried out by explaining the meaning of such a term through a collection of words that is a phrase. Such words, in many cases, are not really translated and used as it is, with a gloss explaining the meaning for the target audience. Similarly, in place of such phrases or words which are unknown to the target readership, some phrases or words are being used which, though they seem to be a “sense-to-sense” translation of the original idea but result in a distorted sense. The use of ‘code-units’ creates an entire set of equivalent code in the target text. Such “code units” are also used in translating “*Pather Kanta*” in phrases like “গ্যাঁটের করি” (*gyanter kori*), which would loosely mean money from one’s pocket. Here, “*gyant*” is much like a baggy piece of cloth accessory in which one ties a knot, meaning and keeps money safe inside their garments. Due to the lack of such culture in the target language, the term “*gyant*” cannot find its equivalent in the translated text. Byomkesh being a Bengali at heart and soul, the garments that he wears Indian forms of clothing. “*Gyant*” refers to a knot tied by cloth, unlike pockets, which are pre-stitched in the clothes. Being jailed is a state associated with negativity in the Bengali culture, which results in the ironic naming of the cell as “শ্রীঘর” (*Srighar*); this could also not be recreated in English and thus has been translated as jail.

The politics of the time when the source text is being written and the time when it is being translated influence both the texts in their respective manner. “*Pather Kanta*”, which was being written somewhere around the mid-1930s, has a more prominent impact of the colonial rule on the usage of terms and phrases in the everyday language. For instance, the use of legal terms like “circumstantial evidence” is particularly mentioned as a term imported from the British legal system, while the translation skips to mention the term as any new input into the everyday lingo. The particular mention of certain newspapers to be foreign is made in the Bangla version, which was the consequence of the recent British rule, while this mention has been omitted in

the translated version as the translation is been made deep into the postcolonial time when English had already been accepted as an Indian language.

Certain phrases and idioms cannot find their equivalent in any other language as such idioms hold the thread of cultural inheritance and memory. A particular kind of tool has been used by thieves in Bengal since the medieval age, which is used to break locks. This instrument and its relation to the thief and the work smith are remembered through various idioms in the Bangla language. But due to the lack of such cultural memory in the target language, such an idiom has been translated using the sense-for-sense method, and the idea of a magical cure has been introduced in its place. The phrase “সাধু লোক” (Sadhu-lok) is used in Bengali not to point out an ascetic but to mark someone’s character a pious; the very phrase is usually used to refer to those with no gluttony, greed, lust or dishonesty. The translated version replaces this rounded term with a plane “straightforward”, which oversimplifies the essence of the phrase.

Such a gap in the source text and the target text also compromises the development of the detective plot. The age group of the murder victims play a vital role in solving the mystery. The age of the murder victims is mentioned in the source text, but due to a lack of an equivalent is skipped in the translation. This also interferes with the artistry of the author as it removes the usage of the figure of speech of foreshadowing.

The translation of the Bangla story “Pather Kanta” into English as “The Gramophone Pin Mystery” by Sreejata Guha for the Penguin publication has, though, been a successful attempt at catering to the needs of the reading population; the loss in this translation could be traced at various levels. Such gaps and losses are the result of the difference in the culture of the source text and target text, and the readership of both versions.

The detective stories by Bandyopadhyay have been adapted in various film versions in Bangla, Hindi and other vernacular languages. One such recent adaptation was based on the story

“Satyanweshi” of the Byomkesh series in Hindi. This intertextual translation of the movie being impacted by factors like financial sources, resulting in cultural influences introducing certain action scenes that could not align with the source text.

These numerous adaptations of the original Byomkesh stories reflect the taste and time of their creation. Thus, the idea of Translation as Rewriting holds that all the new versions, though they cater to an audience that loves mystery and detective thrillers, the other cultural attributes vary among the audience.

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